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SUBJECT: MEDIA BULLIED INTO SILENCE AS CRISES DEEPEN

REF: SANAA 833

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Yemeni journalists continue to face censorship, intimidation, and restrictions on their movements as they attempt to report on the deepening crises confronting their country. Both the ROYG and the Houthis have prevented independent media from visiting the conflict zone in Sa'ada, and a prominent journalist critical of the Sa'ada war has disappeared, with most observers suspecting the government's involvement. Yemen's largest independent daily newspaper, Aden-based al-Ayyam, has been prevented from publishing since May and its offices have become a focal point of Southern anti-government protests. Yemen's current press law gives the government broad powers to silence media outlets, and efforts to rewrite the law are currently stalled. With armed conflict continuing in the north and protests reigniting in the south, the ROYG's short-sighted efforts to silence independent voices are unlikely to produce the long-term stability that the country needs to overcome its development challenges. END SUMMARY.

NO WITNESSES IN SA'ADA

¶2. (C) Journalists in Yemen report facing many difficulties in trying to reach the conflict zone in northern Yemen, where the Houthis, a Zaydi Shi'a group of rebels, are battling government forces. As a result, reporting on the conflict has largely been limited to propagandistic claims put forth by the ROYG and by the Houthis' media office, without corroborating witnesses among the independent and international press. On September 30, Aqeel al-Halali, Editing Secretary of official al-Siyasiya newspaper, told PAO that journalists traveling to Sa'ada have had video cameras and audio equipment confiscated and some have been detained. Those journalists who have reached the conflict zone have traveled incognito, passing themselves off as ordinary civilians and receiving no special protection from the violence.

¶3. (C) A correspondent, apparently traveling incognito for opposition Islah Party-affiliated al-Sahwa newspaper, sustained injuries while reporting from Sa'ada. Mohammed al-Yusfi, Editor-in-Chief of al-Sahwa, told PAO on September 30 that the correspondent received treatment in a government clinic, but "if they had known he was a journalist they would not have treated him" and he could have been arrested or worse. Yusfi affirmed that Houthis are also preventing journalists from entering the conflict zone via access points that they control. Rahma Hugaira, chairwoman of the NGO Media Women Forum, told APAO on September 30 that "it is not safe for journalists to be in Sa'ada. You would fear for your life and the government doesn't want you there." Partly as a result of this lack of access, and partly as a result of the ROYG's opacity regarding the conduct of military operations, journalists do not clearly understand even the most basic contours of the conflict in Sa'ada, including the numbers of Houthi combatants, total numbers of

casualties, and even the ROYG's military commanders in Sa'ada. Nabil al-Sofi, Editor-in-Chief of independent News Yemen, told PAO on September 30, "In Afghanistan we know who the commander of the American forces is, who the commander of the Canadian forces is ... here in Yemen we don't even know who is in command of the armed forces in Sa'ada."

¶4. (C) The government has also made it difficult for international media to reach Sa'ada. New York Times Beirut bureau chief Robert Worth told PAO on September 30 that he had been granted a permit to travel to Sa'ada but it was revoked the day before his planned departure with no explanation. Sana'a-based freelance journalist Laura Kasinoff told APAO on October 1 that she had twice been denied a permit to travel to Sa'ada. She said that other international journalists have been able to reach the conflict zone only by accompanying UN delegations, and they have only visited official IDP camps.

A DISTURBING DISAPPEARANCE

¶5. (C) On September 18, prominent journalist and opposition politician Mohammed al-Maqalih was reportedly kidnapped in Sana'a by armed men, and his whereabouts are still unknown. Maqalih writes for the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP)-affiliated al-Ishtiraki newspaper and was one of the most prominent critics of the Sa'ada war, frequently writing about the harmful impact of the fighting on displaced people. On August 20, he wrote an open letter to President Saleh stating that "the terrible destruction ... created by this war every day is deepening the national wound ... Local and international calls to end the war and address its effects and get to the bottom of its causes and roots -- this is the voice of reason and wisdom that we all need, before it's too late." On September 19, al-Ishtiraki reported Maqalih's kidnapping and stated that "it is likely that his position on the Sa'ada war was the main motive for the kidnapping ... (and that) the national intelligence services are behind it."

(Note: Most media contacts concur with this assessment. End Note.) Khalid al-Anisi, director of human rights organization HOOD, told APAO on September 30 that Maqalih "doesn't really have enemies ... the only one with a reason (to kidnap him) is the government."

¶6. (C) The government has denied responsibility for the kidnapping; on September 29 a security official told News Yemen that Maqalih hadn't actually been kidnapped, and accused him of "running the media kitchen for the extremist field commander Abdulmalik al-Houthi." As of October 4, Maqalih had been missing for over two weeks, but Mohammed Saleh, chief of the Political Department at the YSP, told PolOff on October 3 that the YSP has discovered through independent sources that Maqalih is being held at the National Security Bureau jail in Sana'a.

¶7. (C) On September 14, independent media reported that the government-owned al-Thawra Printing Press, which prints almost all independent newspapers in Sana'a, refused to print an edition of al-Nass which included a story critical of the military's performance in Sa'ada. Al-Nass editor Osama Ghalib said that they had to remove the story and replace it with a full-page ad conveying best wishes for Eid. Discussing the incident, Ali al-Faqih, Managing Editor of independent newspaper al-Masdar, told APAO on September 30 that "there is a distinction between criticizing the government and criticizing the military institutions," intimating that while independent press outlets can publish criticism of the government, criticizing the military institutions and their performance is not permitted.

THEY FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON

¶8. (U) These recent violations of press freedom come on the heels of a broad crackdown on independent newspapers earlier this year (reftel). In May 2009, as separatist protests and violence rocked the southern governorates, the Ministry of Information suspended publication of eight independent newspapers: al-Nida, al-Masdar, al-Watan, al-Diyar,

al-Shari', al-Ahali, al-Mustaqilla, and Yemen's largest independent daily, the Aden-based al-Ayyam. All copies of an edition of London-based newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi were also confiscated in May because of an editorial entitled "The Risks to Yemeni Unity." Information Minister Hassan al-Lawzi cited Article 103 of the Press and Publications Law, which enumerates the grounds upon which the government can impose an "administrative block" on a media outlet. These include "inspiring the spirit of discord or division" and "the promotion of ideals hostile to the purposes and principles of the Yemeni revolution, or the undermining of national unity."

¶9. (U) All of the suspended newspapers have since resumed publication except al-Ayyam, which is alleged to have repeatedly printed stories supportive of the Southern secessionist movement and harmful to national unity. Speaking about the suspension of al-Ayyam, Lawzi told a press conference in July that "the enforcement of the law improves the quality of the exercise of press freedom. Rights are guaranteed to all, but they are not to be used at the expense of the rights of others."

¶10. (U) Along with the release of all political prisoners and the removal of military checkpoints, lifting the restrictions on al-Ayyam has become a recurring demand at protests throughout the south. On September 30, leaders of the southern movement arranged a sit-in outside the headquarters of al-Ayyam in Aden, and security forces established roadblocks in the area to prevent people from reaching the sit-in.

¶11. (C) Efforts to revise the existing press law have thus far been unsuccessful. US-based NGO International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) has been working with the national journalists' union, the Yemen Journalists Syndicate (YJS), to draft a new press law which protects freedom of speech and limits the government's ability to shutter or intimidate independent media. However, IREX Project Director Matt Shelley told APAO on September 29 that the effort is "like trying to herd cats" and lamented the fact that the YJS leadership is close to the government, and is therefore only a half-hearted advocate of its own rights. IREX will try to finalize a draft law during an October 19-21 workshop with lawmakers and journalists in Sana'a, but Shelley was pessimistic about the possibility of developing a consensus around a strong reform-oriented draft.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) 2009 has been a bleak year for press freedom in Yemen. With the tempo of violence intensifying in both the north and the south, the government is seeking to stifle critical voices while pushing repetitive propaganda painting Houthis and Southern dissidents alike as terrorist elements. Arbitrary censorship and extrajudicial kidnappings may silence their critics for now, but the ROYG's infringements on press freedom are unlikely to produce the long-term stability that the country so desperately needs in order to overcome its development challenges. END COMMENT.

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